

Examining a Late Development in Kant's Conception of Our Moral Life: On the Interactions among Perfectionism, Eschatology, and Contentment in Ethics

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Abstract: In the first half, I suggest that Kant's conception of our moral life goes through a significant shift after 1793, with reverberations in his eschatology. The earlier account, based on the postulate of immortality, describes our moral life as an endless pursuit of the highest good, but all this changes in the later account, and I point out three possible reasons for this change of heart. In the second half, I explore how the considerations Kant brings up to argue for his accounts can inform our process of formulating positions with respect to the afterlife. I argue that, in the absence of a convincing theoretical proof for or against the afterlife as well as apodictically certain knowledge of how demanding the moral law is, the Kantian strategy would be to ask which account of our moral life delivers the kind of contentment that can sustain our moral resolve. I also point out a way theists might be able to find contentment despite their moral failures by imagining God's moral kenosis.

Keywords: Contentment, Eschatology, Highest good, Immanuel Kant, Immortality, Kenosis, Perfectionism

Introduction

Kant's moral argument is one of the more notable arguments for positing future existence beyond the sensible world in Western philosophy, and it has long attracted a lot of criticisms as well as passionate defenses. While the controversy surrounding it is well-documented, less attention has been paid to the possibility that Kant's stance toward his own argument might have gone through a significant change. In this paper, I focus on passages in his writings that suggest a late shift in his

eschatological thinking to let them guide the process of forming our own positions with respect to the afterlife. So this paper has two parts. The first part addresses the exegetical question of how Kant's eschatology and his conception of our moral life that undergirds this eschatology evolved late in his life. The second part puts the considerations that come to the fore in the first part to constructive use. I suggest that Kant's shift in eschatology betrays his move away from perfectionism in ethics, and this exegetical study reveals that our attitudes toward the afterlife can be impacted by our sense of contentment in our moral life.

In §1, I summarize Kant's moral argument based mainly on its presentation in *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and I describe the account of our moral life at work in this argument. In §2, I introduce Samuel Kahn's case that Kant disavowed the moral argument late in his career, and I express partial agreement by noting that we can suspect some change in his stance toward his own argument. In §3, I explain that this change stems from a shift in his conception of our moral destiny, which is shaped by his reflections on how we find contentment in our moral life. In §4, I shift gears to start discerning what we can learn from Kant's development in eschatology. I claim that tracking this development leads us to confront the choice between the two conceptions of our moral life: the model of infinite moral progress based on perfectionism in ethics and the model with no serious commitment to the afterlife. And I show how our sense of contentment can help us navigate this choice. In §5, I consider one possible way to find contentment in our moral life not considered by Kant—an approach based on interpreting the Christian notion of justification in terms of what I call moral kenosis.

1. Our Moral Life as an Endless Pursuit of Moral Perfection and Perfect Justice

'The highest good' in Kant's writings usually refers to the proper unity between two elements, morality and happiness. This unity is achieved when every finite rational being's level of happiness is exactly proportionate to the level of moral virtue, which he repeatedly describes as the worthiness to be happy.¹ So the highest good is instantiated in the world in which moral virtue is properly rewarded and every undeserved suffering gets addressed eventually. Based on this concept of the highest good, Kant's moral argument seeks to deliver the two postulates of divine existence and the afterlife. This argument is presented in a number of places,

¹ For instance, see Kant 1998, A806/B834 and Kant 1996a, 5:110. Citation for *Critique of Pure Reason* refers to the standard A/B pagination (Kant 1998). For other works of Kant, citation refers to the Akademie Edition volume and page. All English translations are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

including all three *Critiques*, in different forms, so it is impossible to provide a definitive summary. But in all these iterations, the *need to maintain the highest good as a possibility* for finite rational beings like humans is affirmed early in the argument. But the highest good does not seem to be instantiated in the present sensible world, so we are led to postulate the afterlife (the period when this deficiency of the present world gets resolved) and God (the intelligence with the requisite attributes to ensure full actualization of the highest good). So these two postulates are derived as the necessary conditions of possibility for the highest good.

Why does Kant think that humans have the need to maintain the highest good as possible? In *Critique of Practical Reason*, whose version of the moral argument is most widely known today, the highest good is presented as what the moral law commands us *to promote and to produce* in the world; it is “the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and is a true object of that will” (Kant 1996a, 5:115). And if the highest good is to be an object of our will, this implies that we must be able to treat it as a real possibility for us in order for us to will it rationally; “in the contrary case it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object,” writes Kant (Kant 1996a, 5:143). So the need to make sense of this possibility follows from its status as the end imposed by the moral law, but this leads to the follow-up question of why he thinks that the moral law issues such a demand. One intuitive explanation is that the highest good is Kant’s representation of *perfect distributive justice*. In the essay “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy” (1791), he lists “the disproportion between crimes and penalties in the world” as a kind of evil that functions as an objection to “[God’s] *justice, as judge*” (Kant 1996d, 8:257). Ensuring that everyone gets what one deserves is a common notion of justice many of us have, and Kant seems to be no exception here.²

If the highest good—the state of affairs in which there is genuine moral virtue which is rewarded with a perfectly proportionate degree of happiness—represents the state of perfect distributive justice, I think Kant’s view of it as the final end of morality becomes understandable, as it seems plausible to think that what we ultimately strive to effect through morality is justice in the world. Now, we can still question whether perfect justice is best understood as the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness, but even if we do, we can still agree with his more fundamental point that perfect justice is the end set before us by the moral law. But

² In *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant is reported to have said that divine justice “must limit benevolence so that it distributes good only *according to the subject’s worthiness*” (Kant 1996c, 28:1086–87). He prefers to call it distributive justice (*justitiae distributivae*) rather than retributive justice.

this end, objectively determined by the moral law, is subjectively adopted by “a morally determined will” (Kant 1996a, 5:115), but obviously not every human will wholly embraces this end. Nevertheless, it must still be *possible for us* to adopt this end if it is our duty, as dictated by the famous ought-implies-can principle commonly attributed to Kant.³ Therefore, “the *complete conformity* of dispositions with the moral law . . . must . . . be just as possible as [the object of a morally determined will] is,” and the former is what he means by “*holiness*” or moral “perfection” (Kant 1996a, 5:122).

To briefly recap: according to Kant in the second *Critique*, humans ought to have a morally determined will, which aims to effect perfect justice in the world. So the moral law sets before us the end of moral perfection *at the individual level* and the end of perfect justice *at the collective level*. These two ends correspond to the two elements combined in the highest good, morality and justly apportioned happiness, so the highest good can be understood as the final moral end encapsulating these two aspects. And if the highest good must be maintained as a possibility because it is our final moral end, *two distinct statements about possibility* follow from this, again corresponding to its two elements. First, it must be possible for humans to reach moral perfection in the sense of willing the highest good wholeheartedly, and the pursuit of this end can be understood as encompassing all our moral obligations. Second, the highest good as a state of perfect justice must be possible in order for our willing to be rational.

The second statement about possibility calls for the postulate of the afterlife, but it alone does not imply that the afterlife takes the form of *immortality*. Rather, Kant is led to the postulate of immortality by reflecting on the possibility of moral perfection. This is clear from his plan of presenting the moral argument in the second *Critique*: “we shall try to set forth the grounds of [the possibility of the highest good], first with respect to what is *immediately* within our power and then, secondly, in that which is not in our power” (Kant 1996a, 5:119). While the collective aspect of the highest good, concerned with distributing happiness justly to every individual, leads to the postulate of divine existence because it is not completely within our power, it is moral perfection, the individual aspect of the highest good, which leads to the postulate of immortality. This is because, even though Kant here describes moral perfection as being within our power,⁴ he also claims that it cannot be fully

³ According to Robert Stern, the ought-implies-can principle for Kant means that moral obligations are obligations for us only if we are capable of meeting them. Thus, it is a principle that dictates our understanding of human capacities (Stern 2004, 52–61).

⁴ In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant first introduces his account of radical evil, which states that every human has either the good or the evil disposition as the fundamental ground

attained at any moment in time. This implies that “it can only be found in an *endless progress* toward” it, and this calls for “the presupposition of the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly*” (Kant 1996a, 5:122). This is what is meant by the immortality of the soul, and the infinite moral progress in this immortal existence is to count as reaching moral perfection.

Kant’s second *Critique* model of our life as endless progress toward moral perfection seems to imply that *achievement of perfect justice will also be an everlasting work in progress*. As noted above, the morally perfect will adopts the end of producing the highest good, but our continuous imperfection means that we are often inclined to make the world move farther away from this state of affairs. This is why, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant claims that “a system of happiness proportionately combined with morality . . . is only an idea, the realization of which rests on the condition that **everyone** do what he should” (Kant 1998, A809–10/B837–38). But if we understand ourselves as continuously developing into moral perfection, we should also be continuously engaged in the project of promoting justice in the world; our current moral calling in the sensible world is to continue in the afterlife *ad infinitum*. Even though Kant thinks that we still need to postulate the existence of God as the *ground of the necessary connection* between moral virtue and happiness, this does not necessarily imply that God will unilaterally actualize the highest good at some point in the future. Rather, the moral law presents as our duty “the striving to produce and promote the highest good in the world” (Kant 1996a, 5:126). Then we can still think of God as someone who coordinates our moral efforts so that they can harmoniously lead to the highest good, thereby ensuring that the highest good remains a possibility we can progressively actualize to a greater extent.

Thus, I contend that Kant’s conception of our moral life in the second *Critique* amounts to an endless pursuit of the highest good, with the dual aspects of moral perfection and perfect justice, and this is the context in which his moral argument is advanced. Because he wants to show that our assents to ideas of God and immortality can be necessary postulates, based on “a *need having the force of law*” (Kant 1996a, 5:5), rather than mere hypotheses, he keeps stressing that our production of the highest good is “based on something . . . of itself apodictically certain, namely the moral law” (Kant 1996a, 5:142).

of all the other maxims and that all humans freely choose to start with the evil disposition so that, in order to attain the good disposition, “a *revolution* in the disposition” has to take place (Kant 1996e, 6:47). This account of radical evil calls into question Kant’s position in the second *Critique* that moral perfection is wholly within our power, as he seems open to the possibility that divine assistance may be required for effecting this revolution.

Kant's insistence on the highest good as something we produce calls into question Andrews Reath's influential analysis of Kant's concept of the highest good. Reath makes a distinction between two conceptions of the highest good at work in Kant's writings—the theological and the secular (or political) conceptions—and he claims that the latter fits better with the rest of Kant's practical philosophy. The theological conception is the one I have explained in this section so far, while the secular one treats the highest good as “a social goal to be achieved” in an entirely this-worldly pursuit (Reath 1988, 603), although it does not rule out the activity of God as the moral author. One crucial reason why Reath makes this distinction is that he sees the theological version “as the result of divine, rather than human agency” (Reath 1988, 609); this disqualifies the highest good as the moral end that we can will. But, as I just explained, the theological conception in the second *Critique* does not imply that the highest good is achieved solely through the divine agency. Rather, as Allen Wood suggests, it should be understood as the final moral end shared “with all other rational agents (including God)” (Wood 2020, 48).

Thus, Reath's criticism of the theological conception of the highest good does not hold water for its presentation in the second *Critique*. Rather, the this-worldly project of advancing toward moral perfection and perfect justice is to continue in the afterlife. This is what we should expect given Kant's use of the Christian expression ‘kingdom of God’ to refer to the world of the highest good. Traditionally, the kingdom of God is often said to be here and now, but its final culmination is supposed to take place eschatologically, and this understanding fits with Kant's account of the highest good. Reath claims that Kant's discussion of an ethical community in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) is a clear expression of the secular conception of the highest good (Reath 1988, 606–07), but, again, I am skeptical of his case because this community is described as “a kingdom of God on earth” (Kant 1996e, 6:93). Other passages in *Religion* suggest that Kant's account of our moral life laid out in the second *Critique* is still at work. For instance, he describes the highest good as the final end to which we can “direct our doings and nondoings taken as a whole” (Kant 1996e, 6:5). He also notes that “our universal human duty” is to attain “moral perfection” (Kant 1996e, 6:61), which can be found in “the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law” (Kant 1996e, 6:67). Thus, Kant's early account of our moral life, maintained up to the point of writing *Religion*, is a kind of perfectionist vision that sees world history as culminating in perfect justice, and the afterlife in the form of immortality is needed to maintain the possibility of this vision.

2. Kant's Disavowal of the Moral Argument?

But Kant seems to move away from stressing the highest good in his later writings, which is a surprise given its significance explained in §1. In this section, I start tracking pieces of evidence for this move by following the lead of Samuel Kahn, who makes the case that Kant disavowed the moral argument late in his career (Kahn 2018).⁵ There are a number of considerations that support this case, but the most explicit evidence is Kant's *Opus postumum* passages where he seems to advance a *different argument* for putting faith in God. For instance, consider the following two passages:

There is a God: for there is in moral practical reason a categorical imperative, which extends to all rational world-beings and through which all world-beings are united. (Kant 1993, 22:105)

A command, to which everyone must absolutely give obedience, is to be regarded by everyone as from a being which rules and governs over all. Such a being, as moral, however, is called God. So there is a God. (Kant 1993, 22:127)

In these passages, Kant seems to present an apologetic argument made in the spirit of divine command metaethics. And not only does he advance this argument, but he also claims that it is the “only . . . practically sufficient argument for faith in one God” (Kant 1993, 22:127).⁶ Even though Kant has long held the view that we should regard our duties as divine commands, earlier the moral argument occupies the mediating position between this conclusion and the initial premise that we are rational beings bound by the moral law. For instance, Kant claims in the second *Critique* that “the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good . . . to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands” (Kant 1996a, 5:129). But this mediating role of the concept of the highest good seems to be missing in the *Opus postumum* argument, even though he is generally considered an opponent of a divine command theory.⁷

Admittedly, *Opus postumum* is a collection of scattered notes published posthumously, so it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion from it. For this reason, Allen Wood resists Kahn's case by pointing out that there is no explicit

⁵ Kahn acknowledges that he is reviving the thesis first advanced in Adickes 1920.

⁶ Kahn presents many more *Opus postumum* passages in favor of his case in Kahn 2018, 70–74.

⁷ For a historical analysis of how Kant has come to be understood in this way, see Hare 2000, 272–74.

refutation or repudiation of the moral argument in *Opus postumum* (Wood 2020, 34n). While I do not want to go so far as to join Kahn in advocating the thesis that Kant disavowed the moral argument, I still think it is reasonable to suspect that he has moved in the direction of de-emphasizing it in his practical philosophy. This is especially because Kahn, in anticipation of an objection like Wood's, points out that hints of this movement are found in writings before *Opus postumum*. One example is found in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), where Kant claims that "we cannot very well make obligation (moral constraint) intuitive for ourselves without thereby thinking of *another's* will, namely God's" (Kant 1996g, 6:487).⁸ Again, this seems like a distillation of a divine command metaethics position that the best way to make sense of moral obligations is to understand them as divine commands.

I want to point out one more passage in *The Metaphysics of Morals* that provides some support for Kahn's case. In his introduction to this work, Kant makes the following comment: "reason . . . can . . . promise us, on the testimony of experience, that it will probably be more to our advantage on the whole to obey its commands than to transgress them" (Kant 1996g, 6:216). On the one hand, this testimony of experience does not contradict the moral argument, which is concerned with actualization of the highest good beyond the sensible world, so this comment is no surefire evidence that Kant disavowed the moral argument. On the other hand, it is still striking to see this comment coming from someone who, on numerous occasions, puts forward the moral argument, according to which reason provides a teaching on the *necessary connection* between moral virtue and happiness that is far more determinate than this probable conjecture. Thus, this experiential testimony is a far cry from the ambition of the moral argument, and it should be noted that the former rather than the latter is what reason promises according to Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Thus, I claim that this passage should at least make us wonder whether Kant's stance toward the moral argument might have gone through some change after the publication of *Religion* in 1793.

But if Kant's stance indeed changed, what explains this change between 1793 and 1797? As noted above, there is no official retraction of this argument, so any suggestion is bound to be speculative in nature. Given the hypothesis that his stance indeed went through a significant shift, in the next section, I discuss three possible reasons that would account for this shift.

⁸ This passage is discussed in Kahn 2018, 79–81.

3. Kant's New Account of Our Moral Destiny

First, throughout his writings in practical philosophy, Kant makes a *distinction between legality and morality* of actions. While actions are legal as long as they conform to what the moral law demands, they have true moral worth only if they are “done for the sake of the law” (Kant 1996g, 4:390), as explained in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). That is, if respect for the moral law fails to act as a sufficient incentive for morally determining the will so that it also relies on empirically conditioned inclinations, actions cannot be considered as done solely for the sake of the moral law. But this means that outward appearances of legality cannot ensure morality, and only God who scrutinizes our hearts can make completely reliable judgments of whether we are being moral at any given moment. The finite moral subject is then unsure not only of others' morality but also one's own,⁹ but then we can ask how one can produce the highest good by apportioning happiness to people based on their levels of moral virtue. This is why Lawrence Pasternack, who interprets Kant as holding onto the moral argument throughout his career, thinks that our part in achieving the highest good consists in just becoming morally perfect (Pasternack 2017, 448–50) while providing the right degree of happiness to us is a business wholly reserved for God. But, if this is the case, would it not be a bit misleading to call the highest good our final moral end?

The second possible reason has to do with the question of whether humans can ever *attain moral perfection*. As we saw in §1, Kant assumes that we never attain it completely at any point in time, but it is nevertheless to be found in endless moral progress. In the second *Critique*, he strongly emphasizes this point:

The proposition about the moral vocation of our nature, that only in an endless progress can we attain complete conformity with the moral law, is of the greatest usefulness . . . In default of it, one either quite degrades the moral law from its *holiness* by making it out to be *lenient* (indulgent) and thus conformed to our convenience, or else strains one's calling as well as one's expectation to an unattainable vocation, namely to a hoped-for full acquisition of holiness of will, and so gets lost in enthusiastic *theosophical* dreams that quite contradict self-knowledge; in both cases, constant *effort* to observe precisely and fully a strict and inflexible command of reason . . . is only hindered. (Kant 1996a, 5:122–23)

⁹ Even as early as in the *Groundwork*, Kant recognizes this implication as inevitable given his decision to locate the true moral worth in subjective maxims rather than observable effects of our actions. See Kant 1996b, 4:406–08.

In this passage, Kant is weighing three different options. One option is to posit that we can fully attain moral perfection in time, which he finds unrealistic. Another option is to lower the demand of the moral law, to which he also objects; both in the *Groundwork* and in the second *Critique*, Kant emphasizes that the moral law has to be understood as *inflexible*.¹⁰ By tabbing the remaining option of immortality, he tries to hold onto perfectionism while remaining realistic about our moral capacity.

But can we really treat endless progress that always falls short as meeting the inflexible moral demand? Kant's answer in the second *Critique* is the following: "*The eternal being, to whom the temporal condition is nothing, sees in what is to us an endless series the whole of conformity with the moral law*" (Kant 1996a, 5:123). This answer is reaffirmed in *Religion*: "we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart . . . to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)" (Kant 1996e, 6:67). But many critics have not been satisfied with this answer based on distinguishing between our temporal perspective and God's allegedly atemporal perspective. If we have not reached moral perfection, presumably this will manifest itself in occasional deeds that fail to meet the moral demand, but how can they be regarded as perfected? As Andrew Chignell notes, Kant's reply seems to ascribe to God "an odd sort of overestimation or self-deception" (Chignell 2014, 110).¹¹ By appealing to God as a being outside of temporal conditions, can he really make plausible the idea that moral perfection is possible for us? Can the inflexible moral law brush aside our "permanent deficiency" like this (Kant 1996e, 6:67)? If not, the status of moral perfection as our duty would be in grave danger as well. Kant's answers to these questions in *Religion* is striking: the good disposition "makes up only for the deficiency which is in principle inseparable from the existence of a temporal being" (Kant 1996e, 6:67n). But does this explanation not signal that Kant's staunch opposition to degrading the moral law is wavering?

The third reason, which builds on the first two, has to do with the notion of *contentment* (*Zufriedenheit*), which he sometimes calls *moral pleasure or happiness*.¹² It occupies an absolutely crucial position in Kant's ethics because, as he explains in the

¹⁰ For instance, in the *Groundwork*, Kant points out "a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity" (Kant 1996b, 4:405), and the calling of practical philosophy is precisely to guard against this propensity.

¹¹ For a more extended critique of Kant's reply, see Michalson 1990, 103–06.

¹² In the second *Critique*, he notes that this notion "cannot be called happiness because it does not depend upon the positive concurrence of a feeling" (Kant 1996a, 5:119). But then he continues to use the expression "*moral happiness*" in *Religion* (Kant 1996e, 6:67; 6:75n).

Groundwork, in order for a human, a sensibly affected rational being, to remain interested in morality, "it is . . . required that his reason have the capacity to *induce a feeling of pleasure* or of delight in the fulfillment of duty" (Kant 1996b, 4:460). Without it, it becomes absolutely mystifying why or how humans should maintain interest in the moral law when inclinations pull us in a different direction. This sense of moral contentment is clearly not the same as happiness to be apportioned to us in the highest good, which would presumably include "natural happiness"; rather, it is "satisfaction with one's person and one's own moral conduct" (Kant 1996g, 6:387). Kant notes that his conception of our moral life both in the second *Critique* and in *Religion* promises to deliver this kind of happiness, although his explanation goes through an interesting change. In the second *Critique*, contentment comes from "consciousness of mastery over one's inclinations" (Kant 1996a, 5:119), the sense of autonomy over these empirical elements in the practical use of reason. But in *Religion*, he suggests that contentment is found in "the assurance of the reality and *constancy* of a disposition that always advances in goodness" (Kant 1996e, 6:67).¹³ But, given the inscrutability of our moral dispositions explained in the first reason, all we can muster is an inference "by way of conjecture" based on empirical observation of our life conduct (Kant 1996e, 6:68). But is this sufficient for delivering assurance? This would be especially questionable if we find Kant's two-perspective approach to making sense of our moral perfection unconvincing.

Kant's account of our moral life in *Religion*, with internal tensions due to the issues of moral perfection and contentment, blows up in "The End of All Things" (1994), published a year after *Religion*. This essay begins by distinguishing between, on the one hand, "a time proceeding to infinity" and, on the other hand, eternity, "an *end of all time*" (Kant 1996f, 8:327). Kant's early account of our moral life is based on the former model, but he now seems to favor the latter model in this essay. What explains this change of heart? Kant's explanation here deserves our closest attention as it sets the stage for an alternative account of our moral destiny:

Even assuming a person's moral-physical state here in life at its best – namely as a constant progression and approach to the highest good (marked out for him as a goal) – , he still (even with a consciousness of the unalterability of his disposition) cannot combine it with the prospect of *satisfaction*[*Zufriedenheit*] in an eternally enduring alteration of his state (the moral as well as physical). For the state in which he now is will always remain an ill compared with a better one which he always stands ready to enter; and the representation of an infinite progression toward the

¹³ A disposition that always advances in goodness is the disposition that has become good by going through a revolution as explained in note 4.

final end is nevertheless at the same time a prospect on an infinite series of ills which, even though they may be outweighed by a greater good, do not allow for the possibility of contentment [*Zufriedenheit*]; for he can think that only by supposing that the *final end* will at sometime be *attained*. (Kant 1996f, 8:335)

In this remarkable passage, Kant seems to *renounce* the earlier account of our moral life as an everlasting advance in goodness. Such a view is now being slammed because we cannot think of ourselves as attaining moral perfection or finding contentment in this scheme. As Rachel Zuckert explains, the prospect of “eternal dissatisfaction” in this scheme “would not . . . sustain the moral agent’s commitment to moral action” (Zuckert 2018, 204).

Thus, instead of the postulate of immortality, Kant puts forward a different eschatological scheme of time coming to an end so that there are no more alterations, although this does not rule out our continued existence afterwards as the same noumenal selves. In this scheme, judgment—“the settling of accounts for human beings, based on their conduct in their whole life-time” (Kant 1996f, 8:328)—takes place on the last day, and Kant thinks that it will result in the dualistic division between heaven and hell based on our fundamental moral dispositions.¹⁴ This is another significant departure from his earlier account of our moral life characterized by our everlasting promotion of the highest good. Here, instead, perfect justice is achieved by divine decree instantly, as our pursuit of greater justice comes to a halt. Thus, I think it is fair to say that a different conception of our moral life with a different eschatological model is being introduced in “The End of All Things.”

Does this change continue to hold in Kant’s later writings? What is telling is the fact that, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, we also detect what is first hinted at in *Religion*—namely, his second thoughts about holding onto perfectionism. As noted in §1, Kant’s perfectionism, rooted in his view of the moral law as inflexible, is the basis for his earlier account of our moral life as an endless pursuit of the highest good. With this in mind, consider the following couple of passages in the later work that reveal Kant’s new attitude:

Although there is nothing meritorious in the conformity of one’s actions with right . . . the conformity with right of one’s maxims of such actions, as duties, that is, **respect**

¹⁴ This dualistic distinction is foreshadowed by Kant’s account of radical evil that appears in *Religion*, which is explained in note 4. The eschatological implication of this account is not recognized in *Religion*, so the earlier model of our moral life as the infinite pursuit of the highest good is retained. Then “The End of All Things” can be interpreted as working out the eschatological implication of Kant’s account of radical evil.

for right, is *meritorious*. For one thereby *makes* the right of humanity . . . one's end . . . The same holds true of the universal ethical command, "act in conformity with duty *from* duty." To establish and quicken this disposition in oneself is . . . *meritorious*, since it goes beyond the law of duty for actions . . . these duties . . . must be counted as duties of wide obligation. (Kant 1996g, 6:390–91)

. . . a human being's duty to himself to increase his **moral** perfection . . . is a *narrow* and perfect one in terms of its quality; but it is wide and imperfect in terms of degree, because of the *frailty* (*fragilitas*) of human nature. It is a human being's duty to *strive* for this perfection, but not to *reach* it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress. Hence . . . *with regard* to the subject it is only a wide and imperfect duty to himself. (Kant 1996g, 6:446)

I cannot shake the impression that the early Kant would not endorse these passages. Taking this much consideration of natural human frailty would have been ruled out as conforming the moral law to our convenience, and his objection to this option of lowering the bar of morality is precisely why he opts for the postulate of immortality.

In his introduction to *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes it explicit that he is taking into account "the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience" because "a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application" (Kant 1996g, 6:217). Contrast this with his earlier attitude in the first *Critique*: "the metaphysics of morals is really the pure morality, which is not grounded on any anthropology (no empirical condition)" (Kant 1998, A841/B869). But, in the later work, application to humans seems to be an integral part of the project, and, more problematically from the earlier critical perspective, this application seems to involve degrading the moral law. My contention is that this contrast becomes readily understandable if Kant had become worried that, in his earlier account of our moral destiny, a true sense of contentment was rendered untenable and he had thought that it called for a revision in his account.¹⁵

Thus, what ensues is a *new model of our moral destiny*. Gone is our endless pursuit of the highest good, and the divine agency is much more emphasized in achieving perfect justice. If so, even if there is no need to deny the possible future actualization of the highest good, its importance in our moral life as the final end we produce seems to fade away. Then the need to maintain the highest good as a possibility emphasized in §1 is no longer pressing. Thus, the suspicion that Kant's conception

¹⁵ In his analysis of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Allen Wood also points out that Kant is here investigating how pure moral principles *apply* to human nature, which is different from his earlier understanding of what a metaphysics of morals should consist in (Wood 2002, 2–4).

of our moral life changed mutually reinforces the hypothesis reviewed in §2 that he moved in the direction of de-emphasizing the moral argument, which is based on his earlier account of our moral life.

And with this new, non-perfectionist model of our moral life comes a new answer to the question of wherein lies our moral contentment. In contrast to the earlier answer in *Religion* that connects contentment with our continuous advance toward the highest good,¹⁶ the answer in *The Metaphysics of Morals* shows no connection with this concept. The new answer is that one's contentment comes from being "aware of having done his often bitter duty"; "virtue is its own reward" (Kant 1996g, 6:377), proclaims Kant.

4. Choice among Different Conceptions of Our Moral Life

Up to this point, I gathered textual evidence in support of the hypothesis that Kant moved away from seeing our moral life as an endless pursuit of the highest good. I hope I have made this hypothesis plausible by this point, but regardless of how securely this hypothesis has been established, the practical considerations he brings up in the above passages deserve our attention in their own right. So in addition to helping us evaluate the exegetical thesis that he changed his conception of our moral life after 1793, these passages can guide us today as we try to form our own positions regarding the afterlife. I shift my focus to the latter task in this section by critically assessing considerations brought up by Kant.

Does Kant's new model of our moral destiny resolve the issue of contentment? If contentment is to be located in moments when we fulfill our often bitter duty, this seems to imply that there will be *discontent* in other moments when we clearly fail to heed the call of duty as well as when we are not entirely sure because we cannot scrutinize our own hearts. Then the question of how we should deal with this kind of discontent remains, so the issue is not completely resolved yet. Another, more serious issue I see in the new model is that achievement of the highest good may have become *too discontinuous* from our pursuit of justice in the present world. In the earlier account, we can treat our this-worldly pursuit as preserved and honored in the culmination of the highest good in the afterlife. But if we emphasize divine agency in bringing it about too much, we may get the impression that achievement of perfect justice does not have much to do with our agency, which, for many of us,

¹⁶ In *Religion*, Kant claims that one who is assured that one's disposition is progressing in the right direction may "reasonably hope that...if after this life another awaits him, that he will persevere in it...and come ever closer to his goal of perfection, though it is unattainable" (Kant 1996e, 6:68).

would seem to hamper our resolution to improve the level of justice in the present world. This impression seems to be a source of discontent in its own way.

If one's morality at any given moment is inscrutable, full actualization of the highest good would be impossible without divine involvement. Does this also imply that humans cannot make *any* contribution to achieving the proportionality involved in the highest good? I think not, because I am fairly confident that, for instance, preventing a war that would have caused innumerable deaths of civilian children is an approximation toward the highest good even if we lack the ability to measure their precise levels of moral virtue. So, *contra* Lawrence Pasternack, I think we can understand our agency as relevant to achieving perfect justice of the collective as well as individual moral perfection, even if we grant that final culmination of the former, if it were to happen, is up to God. If we assume that treating ourselves as having some modicum of influence in this project is desirable for moral motivation, then the choice between Kant's earlier and later models of our moral life comes down to our *choice about perfectionism*. If we think of the moral law as making perfectionist demands on us, we would be more inclined to postulate the afterlife to avoid the fate that our life is guaranteed to be a moral failure (if we operate with Kant's assumption that this cannot be fully attained in time, at least in this present world). If we instead set the bar of morality lower by emphasizing its need to be fitted to the frailty of human nature, we can think of our moral life as an entirely this-worldly approximation toward the highest good. At this point, how can we navigate this choice? How should we understand the demand of the moral law?

Some may find that moral-psychological considerations related to the notion of contentment should lead us down the non-perfectionist route. But others can bring up different moral-psychological considerations that favor the perfectionist option. For instance, even if it is possible in theory to think of our moral destiny as doing all we can to bring the present world closer to the highest good, some of us can be overwhelmed by the impression that the current level of justice in the present world is so low that this project is not really worthwhile, so to speak. And even if we posit that the world can move very close to the ideal of the highest good in the distant future, world history on the whole will fall way short of this standard because it includes countless lives with unaddressed injustices in the past. Considering this world history can breed its own discontent in our moral life, which can be addressed by the eschatological hope that in the future these injustices may get addressed, and this can incline us to opt for something like Kant's earlier account of our moral life.

Andrew Chignell actually points out that Kant's moral argument can be interpreted along these lines. In addition to the moral-coherence version of this argument, which is what I laid out in §1, Chignell thinks we can detect what he calls

the moral-psychological version in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) and *Religion* (Chignell 2022, 61).¹⁷ The latter version gets going by appealing to the *need to support our moral resolve based on hope for the highest good*, pointing out that many of us would be demoralized if we cannot hope for a just arrangement of the world in the future. So the need to maintain the highest good as a possibility I stressed in §1 as an essential step in Kant's moral argument is now construed in moral-psychological terms, and the postulates of divine existence and the afterlife follow from this moral-psychological need.

In the third *Critique*, we can indeed find this kind of moral-psychological considerations. For instance, after presenting the moral-coherence version of the argument in the second *Critique* again, Kant adds that the postulate of divine existence can be justified "even if for nothing more than avoiding the danger of seeing [our striving for the highest good] as entirely futile in its effects" (Kant 2000, 5:446). He also claims that the perfectly righteous man, "if he would remain attached to the appeal of his moral inner vocation and not weaken the respect, . . . must assume the existence of a **moral** author of the world, i.e., of God" (Kant 2000, 5:452–53). In *Religion*, he claims that lacking the final end of the highest good "would . . . be a hindrance to moral resolve" (Kant 1996e, 6:5). But these passages are mentioned alongside the moral-coherence version of the argument, so I have doubts about whether Kant ever intends the moral-psychological version to stand on its own.¹⁸ This is especially because Chignell's moral-psychological reconstruction explicitly relies on premises that are empirical in character, such as the premise positing the correlation between lack of hope for future actualization of the highest good and demoralization. Reliance on such premises that need to be tested in experience means that this version cannot match Kant's high ambition of having the moral argument deliver postulates with apodictic certainty, as explained in §1.

However, while these moral-psychological considerations cannot establish the moral argument with law-like necessity, they can still inform our decisions about which conception of our moral destiny to adopt, as long as we can be at peace with the fact that different people will make different choices here. And if this decision-making has a lot to do with contentment in our moral life, this kind of individual differences in opinion seems quite appropriate, as we should expect any proposed contentment to be effective in different degrees for different people. Personally, I find Chignell's moral-psychological reconstruction of the moral argument quite

¹⁷ Chignell's analysis of the highest good argument hearkens back to Robert Adams' work (Adams 1987, 150–55). Adams calls these two versions "*theoretical* and *practical* arguments" (Adams 1987, 150).

¹⁸ Allen Wood, who champions the moral-coherence version of Kant's moral argument, insists that the moral-psychological version is "fundamentally different from Kant's" (Wood 2020, 41n).

convincing, as the hope for greater actualization of distributive justice in the afterlife is morally invigorating to me. But what the analysis of Kant's development in moral and eschatological thinking in §§1–3 teaches us is that, if we opt for the perfectionist option, it would be desirable to come up with a *way to deal with the discontent* that comes from repeatedly falling short of attaining the final moral end. So this particular case of discontent still looms large, and, in the next section, I suggest a strategy for dealing with this issue that is available for theists who are comfortable with conceptualizing God in personal terms.

5. Contentment from Appreciating God's Moral Kenosis

As I showed in §3, Kant takes the two-perspective approach to the question of how moral perfection is possible for us in the second *Critique* and *Religion*; from the temporal perspective, our life is endless moral progress, but this is counted as the perfected whole from the atemporal perspective of God. And in such a moral life, contentment is supposed to come from the assurance of the constancy of the fundamentally good disposition that governs all the other maxims. It should be noted that these two points are Kant's adaptations of the traditional Christian doctrines of justification through imputed righteousness and assurance of salvation, respectively. The most common interpretation of the former doctrine is that humans who have faith in Jesus are *simul iustus et peccator*.¹⁹ That is, they are *peccator* or sinful before the moral law, but they are *iustus* or justified before God who sees in divine judgment not their own imperfect righteousness but the allegedly perfect righteousness of Jesus; thus, it is said that the righteousness of Jesus is *imputed* to Christians through faith. In this Christian scheme, contentment comes not from attaining perfect righteousness on their own but from having perfect righteousness imputed to them so that they can think of themselves as well-pleasing to God. Thus, those who have faith in Jesus are often said to enjoy the assurance of salvation.

It should be clear that Kant's division between the temporal and atemporal perspectives is his adaptation of *simul iustus et peccator*. But he does not preserve it in its traditional form, because he seems to hold that one's righteousness cannot be imputed to someone else when being judged by God,²⁰ and I think many would find

¹⁹ This phrase comes from lectures on the epistle to Galatians by Martin Luther, arguably the most well-known theologian of justification in the history of Christian theology. See Luther 1963, 229–33.

²⁰ Kant does not make this point explicitly in *Religion*. But he does note that, as far as reason can tell, the personal debt of sin "is not a *transmissible* liability which can be made over to somebody else" (Kant 1996e, 6:72), and I think he would hold a similar objection to transmission of one's righteousness to someone else.

his stance here intuitively appealing; a traditional Christian story can leave the impression that God is being self-deceiving by choosing to focus on Jesus' perfect righteousness when what should be judged is other humans' imperfect lives. But, as I claimed in §3, Kant's adaptation fails to banish the impression of divine self-deception, and the problem in a traditional Christian story carries over. And this rightfully puts into question whether we can have assurance and contentment through our conjectural observation of our own dispositions. Thus, Kant's adaptation of these doctrines comes to a screeching halt in "The End of All Things."

If the common Christian interpretation of justification and Kant's adaptation are both unsatisfactory given that they both lead to the impression that God engages in some kind of self-deception, I would like to suggest a different way to make sense of *simul iustus et peccator*. The common Christian interpretation and Kant's adaptation are actually similar in that they both describe humans as *ascending* to the level of holiness in divine judgment; the difference lies in whether this ascent is through Jesus' righteousness or our own moral progress. If these instances of the paradigm of human ascent strike us as unconvincing, we should naturally consider the alternative paradigm of *divine descent*. In this paradigm, humans would be judged sinful before the moral law but 'justified' before God because God has become sin, so to speak; this would imply that sinful humans are no longer an abomination in God's eyes because God has descended to the moral low ground Godself. If Christianity is at its heart a religion that believes in God's kenosis or abasement, this paradigm strikes me as an option worth considering as the framework for interpreting the Christian doctrine of justification.

But my impression is that most Christians have not thought of kenosis in such moral terms; most of them hold moral perfection or omnibenevolence as a divine attribute, and this attribute strikes them as being incompatible with God's being on the moral low ground. But I think this imagination of God on the moral low ground is possible if we think of God as bearing *ultimate responsibility* for all the evils in the world without being blameworthy for them.²¹ For instance, according to John Hick, the Irenaean strand of Christianity is distinguished from the more well-known Augustinian tradition in part by its open embrace of divine omni-responsibility (Hick 2010, 236). Contrary to the Augustinian free-will defense that tries to get God off the hook for all the evils in the world by locating their source in human free choices gone awry (sometimes angelic free choices as well), the Irenaean approach purports to tell a story of how God meets the responsibility for these evils. Thus,

²¹ Here we can appeal to the distinction between moral blameworthiness and responsibility Nelson Pike makes in Pike 1958, 119.

theists have a tradition in which they can develop an interpretation of the Christian notion of justification in terms of divine descent in light of divine responsibility, although Hick does not work out the moral implications of this Irenaean tradition through the end. The one who comes closer is Marilyn Adams, whose response to the problem of evil should be classified as Irenaean given her strong affirmation of divine responsibility. It is no accident that her response includes the following interpretation of the crucifixion: "because radical vulnerability to, inevitable (at least collective) participation in horrors, is a harm to human being for which God is *responsible*, God's offering of the Word made flesh to us bears analogies to *sin offerings*" (Adams 2006, 275). Christians who subscribe to a high christology can point to the crucifixion as the moment when God's kenosis to the moral low ground manifests itself in history, which would be appropriate given that the notion of kenosis is traditionally associated with divine incarnation.

I think the Christian doctrine of justification holds great potential in our moral life. Robert Adams explains this by noting its usefulness "to those whose guilt is so great that it would *not* be neurotic for them to despair of being able to do enough good in the future to make up for it" (Adams 1997, 99). For those plagued with the sense that they are unforgivable, so to speak, the belief that they can stand justified before the divine judge despite their past moral failures can motivate them to remain committed to the shared project of morality. Especially today as we confront the ominous possible future of human civilization in light of ongoing ecological destruction, the prospect that humanity as a whole will struggle with this sense of failure is unfortunately too realistic. If we do end up struggling with the question of what we have brought upon ourselves and our planet, a credible interpretation of *simul iustus et peccator* is all the more worth pursuing as it promises to answer the question of *how we can avoid both discontent and complacency* in our moral life.

So Kant is spot on when he looks to this Christian tradition to find a way to deal with the discontent of our continual moral failures, even though I think he ultimately fails to provide a compelling interpretation of this doctrine. And I submit that many theists will find an interpretation based on God's moral kenosis to be more plausible than the ones based on our ascent. In the former, our contentment lies in not being separated from God despite our moral failures. Rather, God joins us on the moral low ground by taking ultimate responsibility for all the evils in the world, including moral evils we commit, and contentment comes from walking alongside God in our path of moral progress. As explained in §4, my personal preference right now is to think of this path as continuing in the afterlife, but even those who think that our moral progress stops with our physical death can still appeal to this sense of contentment.

Conclusion

In this paper, I delineated Kant's move from the postulate of immortality undergirded by perfectionist ethics to a new account of our moral destiny, in which the affirmation of the afterlife is not pronounced if not entirely missing. Based on this exegetical study, I suggested that our experience of contentment in moral life can help us make our own choices between the earlier and the later accounts of our moral life in Kant. Of course, many more options can be considered in reality, but this will not invalidate the strategy of relying on the question of how we can find contentment in our moral life as our guide. Using this Kantian strategy is based on his position that we do not possess a theoretical proof about whether there is an afterlife or not, as such a proof would make his moral argument superfluous. This strategy also assumes that we are not completely certain about whether the moral law is inflexible or whether it can be fitted to human frailty. My claim is that, if we grant these uncertainties, we can turn to this strategy.

If we just focus on the two options presented to us in this exegetical investigation, I take the following to be the crucial questions that emerged. Those who are attracted to Kant's earlier model—infinite moral progress toward the highest good—should ask themselves whether they can dispatch the discontent of repeatedly coming up short so that our moral life does not turn into a Sisyphean exercise (of course, some may find contentment in embracing this Sisyphean absurdity à la Albert Camus). Those who are attracted to Kant's later model—turning our focus away from the highest good to our local promotion of justice in the present world—should ask themselves whether they can be at peace with the prospect that the level of justice in world history may end up being rather low so that they do not need the moral-psychological support of eschatological hopes.

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